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ABSTRACT

Nonnative speakers learn to write just as native speakers do, by learning to adjust their "monitors." Teachers too often focus on form rather than on the students' interests and abilities. With the monitor working at a low level, beginning writers can use their store of acquired skills, and with the monitor level higher, they can integrate their learned skills. However, when native or nonnative speakers' individual ideas are forced to conform to a prescribed format and formula, the writing loses its effect and its versatility. Students' anxiety about writing is often due to overactive monitors. In one developmental writing program for college-level students of English as a second language, all students' initial essays were in a formal style that sounded rigid and confused, with grammatical errors profuse and syntactic and knowledge errors difficult to distinguish. Taught in the context of the above findings, the students became more comfortable with the task of writing and acquired fluidity and correctness. (MSE)

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ESL STUDENTS AND WRITING ACQUISITION THEORY

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After several weeks of teaching in the Composition Tutorial Center (CTC), I asked my students to write down their thoughts and feelings about the center and about their writing. Elena, a native Spanish speaker, wrote:

> By now writing comes more easily and freely. I just write what I think, no matter what. But in a way it doesn't help me with my English class. Since English class writing deals with not only ideas in paper, but also in sentence construction, vocabulary, techniques, etc. this class in that sense don't help much.

I didn't know how to respond. Mandated by the university, the CTC was set up to insure that George Mason students could write when they graduated. Students whose scores were unsatisfactory on entrance writing tests are required to attend two hours weekly, and in conjunction with their Freshman English courses if possible. Our writing-centered approach is designed to break down the barriers created by consistent focus on structure, thereby allowing students to reduce conscious monitoring and utilize their acquired and learned language skills.

I once knew a writer, who was also one of my teachers, who said, "You are what you write." I knew that, willingly or not, thoughts expressed by words on paper become a concrete example of the writer; moreover, I felt that writers at every level are aware of this, and for inexperienced writers, the vulnerability this knowledge implies becomes an obsession which inhibits their writing. Too many times writing studdents are required to hide

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their own thoughts and present instead prefabricated units of writing which contain little controversy and less emotion, and fit into an arbitrary mold the teacher thinks represents good writing.

It's just like a house. Who in one's right mind would buy a prefabricated house if instead one could design and presonally direct the construction to meet each individual need? Instead of a house that looks like everybody else's, you want a large kitchen because you like to cook, you want separate bedrooms so each family member can have privacy, you want a garage for the car you always dreamed of. In a pre-fabricated house the kitchen might be too small, there might be only enough room for two bedrooms, it might be impossible to build a garage because of the closeness of the next house, and so on. Of course, any house, whether pre-fabricated or custom-designed, is a reflection of the owner. It's a little riskier to live in a house you've designed because you are putting yourself, your tastes, your lifestyle on the line. Some pull it off better than others, but it's a lot more comfortable. In writing, the prescribed mold accomodates any argument that comes along. It's just like a pre-fabricated house, since it's the lowest common denominator. When individual ideas are crammed into five paragraph themes and teacher-directed formulas, the writing loses its effect and versatility. The only difference--just like the neighborhood of prefabs--is the name at the top of the mailbox.

From my teaching experience I also knew that some native speakers have as much trouble writing as non-native speakers.

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The difficulty often comes from instruction which has focused on form to the exclusion of everything else, as if the students begin as architects and are forced to inhabit pre-fabricated houses because that is how teachers think writers write. All students, both native and non-native speakers, slave over vacuous papers which look correct and fit the teacher's arbitrary specifications. The constant worry about form is due in part to an overactive Monitor.

So there I was with two theories and a student who didn't see a connection between the CTC and her English class. How could I help her develop a connection? I told myself that learning to write must be like learning to speak. I was using a total immersion theory for writing, telling my students to write whatever came to mind without worrying about the appearance; they could restructure their writing later. I told them to jump right in, that they all knew about themselves and had plenty of material with which to work.

In the CTC, each student writes an an entry essay. The directions are as follows:

> Assignment: Please write an essay in which you explain how some activity of yours--anything from playing a video game to working at a fast-food counter--has influenced you and helped to make you the person you are now. Include concrete details.

I found that all of my students adopted a formal style which, at times, sounded rigid and confused. Not only did grammatical

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errors abound, but it became difficult to separate syntactic errors from mistakes due to ignorance. For example:

> I worked hard with chemicals and equipments instead of play or sleep. I did not mine been in lab at night or hot summer. She was so please with me and so I was. At the last day of high school I told her I want to be a good chemistest and she blessed me with all her heart.
>
> Here I am trying to echieve my goal and keep that promise with her. My high school life is mostly effected me the person I am now.

Youngsook, the writer, had some English instruction in Korea and graduated from an Arlington high school. She decided to write about high school and a favorite teacher of her's. In the selection above, she omittted articles, had many subject/verb agreement errors, used incorrect words, and reversed word order. Her first assignment in the CTC was to freewrite, or write whetever came to mind. I told her not to worry about how it looked, that the task was to write as many ideas as possible or to follow a particular topic if one came to mind. The following is Youngsook's first freewrite:

> Biology book is too big and heavy for me. The professor talks so fast I can't even take a note. This was my seconde day of school. My first day I don't

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recall anything. I guess I got lost.

The sentences, while shorter than those in the entry essay, are precise; although she switches tenses, the subjects and verbs agree and the word order is clear. Yes, she has omitted an article, but the articles are one of the acquired skills of English which may take years to learn.

When the pressure to write a structurally correct paper is off, writing improves. I am not saying that structure is not important; structure grows from content. In teaching writing it is crucial to stress content first, without regard to how the paper looks. A writer's ability to generate words and sentences is an important first step, just like learning to speak involves the child's or second language learner's ability to combine various words and morphemes in order to form new sentences.

Many times ESL student writers have to regress, or simplify their writing to a point where they feel comfortable before taking a first step. We need to realize that regression represents potential for growth. It means a writer is taking risks and flexing new muscles. It means one can turn down one's Monitor. For example, Karin, a Finnish student, told us in her entry essay that she had studied English for ten years in Finland, but her classroom English was of little help in the U.S.:

> I have been here in the U.S.A. some months, and I came here because I wanted to learn to speak English. I had studied English ten years in Finland. But here I

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> noticed that I just don't know a word. When I started to study, here in George Mason University, I didn't understand anything my professors were speaking. Now I understand some words from here and sone words from there.

Karin wrote structured sentences, her past tenses expressed proper time sequence and she knew when to use prepositions, though not necessarily which one. The curious aspect of this paragraph is that it does not address the assignment for the CTC entry essay which, as I quoted previously, asks the student to write about some activity which has been influential and to include concrete details.

Notice the difference between the above paragraph and her first freewrite:

> I have been sad alreadt two months. I have a serious problem. I have put about twenty pounds weight on within some months. This sounds funny but it is not. Every monday I decide to start some kind of diet. So I did today also. This morning I ate just one grapefruit, and I trank one cup of coffee. Now I am so hungry that I would (could) eat a horse.

Karin addressed an important issue and in doing so allowed herself to turn down her Monitor. While the rhythm of her sentences seems to be a combination of English and Finnish, she

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has control of her verbs and she corrects her use of would. Karin's regression in the rhythm of her writing occurs in a place to which she can return and revise, and thus allows her to improve. Comfortable with freewriting, she would ofter make corrections when she read her work aloud. She controlled her Monitor. SAhe wrote easgerly about various aspects of her life, which helped generate ideas for her English papers.

The following excerpt is from a paper Karin worte for her Freshman Composition class:

> When I was just four years old I already knew that my future was going to deal with horses. Maybe I just watched too many Westerns and old movies with horses. I used to build up horses from our furniture, and then I rode like a strom wind around our house--You can guess how happy my Mother was!
>
> When I was seven years old I rode a pony in Paris. After that I lost my heart to horses completely. I started to take riding lessons in Finland. I was twelve years old when I won my first riding competition. You may not believe it but it was a great feeling, even if the fences were not very high.

She had mentioned horseback riding several times in her freewriting drafts. Her 101 instructor left topic choices open. Karin knew about horses and naturally chose to write about them. The storm wind metaphor ccupled with the image of building furniture horses are notable. Her conversational style, her

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ability to vary sentence structures, and the ease with which she incorporates personal feelings, enhance her writing.

In a beginning writing class, selecting a topic can be a pervasive problem. An assigned topic with exact parameters often inhibits writing. The student may not know or even care about the topic, which means s/he won't be able to tap into language that is already in mind.

Next I'll share two examples written by Vinh, a Vietnamese student:

> Why does the oresident of the U.S. prefers the Senate and the House to belong to the same political party with him. It's just that the president would gain more favor from his party members without much confusions and disputations. Otherwise it will be a disaster of confusions in governing for the president with so much different ideas from other parties.

> I just could not sleep because of the old air and the weakening sunlight rays that sneaked into the room through the window's blind. I sat up in my bed and hugged my pillow. I suddenly felt so lonely and tears started to roll from my eyes to say "hello" to the morning.

She brought the first passage into the CTC to get some feedback. She was writing an exercise for English 100 and did not feel

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comfortable with it. The second passage is from some freewriting she did and is representative of the style of writing she seemed to like. She was sad because her mother had died several months before. Look at the difference in the writings. One is strong, descriptive, and writer-involved. The other is confusing, garbled, and difficult to follow. Vinh engages and disengages her Monitor. When she selects a meaningful topic, she feels free to explore it; when a topic is chosen for her she feels constrained and switches to a more distant style, perhaps emulating something more formal, or perhaps trying to remove herself from an area about which she has little knowledge while trying to complete the assignment. One day it may be necessary for Vinh to write about politics, just as it becomes necessary for each student to respond directly to an assigned topic at one time or another. The ability to engage in meaningful, often personal writing, enables one to gain confidence, and this carries over to assignments. Think of learning to talk. Once the ability is recognized, there is no end to the process.

I'd like to return to Elena, the student I quoted at the beginning of the paper. She was glad to write freely and easily, but saw no connection between freewriting and her English class. Elena had a good case of writing anxiety. Her first assignment in Freshman Composition was to write about an essay on writing which the class had read. Elena felt good about her writing but not so good about her paper. At best it was copnfusing; her professor told her to rewrite it and to get help, which she was already doing. Here is an example from her paper:

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> Are writers born or created? As the predisposition for writtting is inborn with, a writer has to be created or educated through life. Writers are normal people withe the capacity of transfroming words into writen language. Anyone can writte, but are few the ones that can express ideas clearly. The difference between people whoi write and writers it's writing itself.

Where could I start? Spelling errors? Idioms? Syntax? I decided to urge Elena to freewrite about the assignment, but she would not do it. She thought she knew what the professor wanted, and it was not freewriting. The more she struggled, the more anxious she became. She couldn't rewrite the paper and she refused to write in the CTC because she didn't think it helped. Luckily, several things happened coincidentally which helped alleviate the pressure. Elensa spoke to her professor about her writing difficulties. Her professor told her that as long as she completed all of the assignments, she could turn in the papers when she felt they were ready. I spent several sessions explaining to Elena that it was permissible to write her own opinion about the essay she ahd read--that she needn't turn it in--but it might be a good place to start a revision. Finally, she tried, and here is what she wrote:

> I have mixed feelings in my response to Stafford. He is persuasive and is convincing me, but I also disagree

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with him. He expresseshimself clearly and some of his ideas are wise. But some of his opinions make me mad. He says how freely writting comes, and here I am having pain while writing this paper.

It's as if being able to write about her pain freed her ability to write. In essence, she turned down her Monitor and wrote what she thought. The paragraph is honest and real, and because she knows herself best, she can express what she knows.

About this time Elena and I decided that she would work on drafts of the paper at home and bring them in to read after her CTC sessions. Usually she would read aloud and I would make comments or ask questions. Because Elena felt more comfortable, she took a risk and did some freewriting about the essay and about herself.

There is freedom when writting. Thoughts flows and can be materialized when they are put into written words. No one tells me what I write is wrong, because my ideas are my own and are my rigth. When I present a paper its full with my thoughts and ideas, and is also clearly expressed in written language; there are people not channeled to my flow of insights.

The writing is full of spelling errors and subject/verb agreement errors; Elena's writing regressed but is full of her opinions. Because she could take a stand, she could more easily respond to the essay itself. She attempted another draft:

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> My response when I readed Stafford essay on writing have a lot of mixed feeling. He is persuasive and is convincing me, but there are points where I also disagree with him. He expresses himself clearly and some of his points are wise. But some of his opinions make me mad. Stafford talks about how freely writting comes, and here I am having pain while writing this paper.

In this trial run, she turns up her Monitor, just a little, to get the feel of a more formal paper. She incorporates her ideas and feels sure enough about her opinion to include the line about pain from her first freewrite. At this time I noticed arrows and marks on Elena's drafts, an indication that she was revising her own work. When she read aloud to me she would add and delete words in appropriate places and occasionally notice misspelled words. After eight drafts, Elena wrote her ninth and final one. The following is an excerpt:

> My response while I was reading Stafford essay on writing have a lot of mixed feelings. He is persuasive and convincing, but there are points where I also disagree with him. He expressed himself clearly, and some of his ideas are wise. But some of his opinions make me mad. Stafford talks about how freely writing comes, and here I am having pain while writing. What

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> I can not understand is how an essay on writing, and how to accomplish it, could leave one in a situation like this.

While it is by no means perfect, it makes sense, flows fairly smoothly, and focuses on Elena's problem, her writing ability compared to a writer who writes about writing. Elena earned a C- on the paper. It was like gold to her. I believe her grade reflects content, not form, and is exactly what she needed to spur her on.

As she revised her paper, her writing in the CTC became more fluid. Here are some examples:

> Finally I am where I'm supposed to be. After twelve years of education I have to continue studying for a future, wherever it means. I don't even know what career I'm going to choose, but there is no other choice but being in a university.

> The thing I hated the most was at night after returning from being with friends, I had to give my nightly report. It is a complete invasion of my life . . .

> I try to recall all the sensations I felt during the different times I went to the country, forest and mountains. My heart is pumping faster as I walk and the weight of the pack seems to disappear. My throat is dry as I feel the sweat from my forehead dripping in

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my face.

> I got interested in the idea of writing about superstition. I don't believe in any superstition except for the believe that mondays and fridays are hazard to my health. I don't have any amulets for good luck, I just try to use the same pen or pencil when taking a test , so it gives me some confidence.

Elena's writing was never mechanically perfect--often she had to revise six or seven times, and occasionally the rhythms of English were broken by those of Spanish. However, her confidence grew; she had strong opinions and liked to express them. She discovered the areas on which to concentrate when she was ready to edit a final draft. She kept a list of propositions in front of her, read to one of her sisters to get help with her verb tenses, always checked for the difference between "its" and "it's," and kept a dictionary close by. Elena, by the way, earned a C in Freshman Composition and a B in a more advanced English class. She told me she liked to write about literature so much she might like to take more literature courses. Elena's form grew from her content. She learned to trust her opinions and let her work grow from them. She knew when to engage and to disengage her Monitor, and she felt good about her work.

Chet, a Thai student and my final example, surprised me. For a long time I believed ESL writing instruction had to be arranged in a particualr manner because a lack of vocabulary might inhibit the writer's ability to describe and explain.

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About mid-semester, Chet came to the CTC; he had moved from Thailand during the summer. He spoke haltingly and constantly checked his dictionary for correct words. My other ESL students were fluent speakers and I felt certain that Chet would have a great deal of difficulty in writing. His first freewrite lacked clarity and seemed deficiecnt in many basic areas of writing proficiency.

> Suddenly, the boy who was about my age rode a bicycle across the street without looking at the traffic before. I collide not hard with the boy first and then his bicycle, but exactly he had to hurt because "body cover metal collide with metal cover body."

The reversed word order, verb agreement errors, and the direct quote made the writing difficult to understand. We talked about the subject of the writing; he described an accident he had had just before he moved to the United States. After he explained the circumstances, I asked him to write down the ideas he had mentioned, with as much detail as possible. I also asked about the quotation. He said it was a direct translation from Thai.

> A bicycle which was covered by the boy and a car which covered me collide with each other. The boy must hurt more than me because my car hited (hit) him directly. On the other hand, I wasn't hited because my car protected me, The boy did not hit me but hit the car.

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Notice how, with his limited vocabulary, Chet describes the situation. The rhythm of his native language with English words creates an unusual yet understandable piece of writing. His awareness of verb tenses in the second sentence allows him to correct his agreement error. His third revision is more fluent:

> Suddenly, the boy who was about my age rode a bicycle across the street without looking at the traffic before. the bicycle which was covered by the boy and a car which covered me collide with each other. The boy must be hurt more than me truely because my car hit him directly. On the other hand, I wasn't hit because my car protected me.

To better develop his competency, Chet repeated his non-native composition course in the spring. As you recall, I mentioned my concern that a student's lack of vocabulary might necessitate a different approach for teaching writing. I thought Chet, dictionary in hand, would be the prime example but he proved me wrong.

Not only did Chet master freewriting and revision, he employed the process in his academic writing. One of the most frequently expressed fears of an approach to writing which emphasizes the process rather than the product is that it may help a student be a better creative writer but that creativity has nothing to do with writing college papers. Chet, however, used a freewrite to develop a formal paper for an English

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assignment. He was comfortable with his Monitor reduced and willingly revised until the paper was flawless. He wrote his drafts at home and brought them in for feedback and to work on revision. The following four excerpts demonstrate the full range of process-based writing coupled with conscious control of the Monitor.

In the first example Chet turns down his Monitor and freewrites:

> I don't know when chopsticks has been using in Thailand. Certainly They are used by many people for a long long time. Using chopsticks is not too difficult. You use only four fingers to grape the chopsticks. If you try to use only two or three times you will get use to it.

The second example is his first draft. While shorter, he extracts the points which seem important to him. He also corrects his verb agreement error:

> Chopsticks have been used in Thailand for a long time, Everyone who uses shopsticks has his own style. There is no right or wrong way to use them.

The third draft showsd how Chet expands his ideas:

> Chopsticks have been used in Thailand for many years. The technique of using chopsticks is passed down from

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generation to generation, According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English "Chopsticks is either a pair of narrow sticks held between the thumb and fingers and used in East Asian countries for lifting food to the mouth." The use of chopsticks in Thailand came from Chinese immigrants who came to Thailand a century ago.

His sentences are structurally correct and he rearranges his ideas, explaining the history of chopsticks before discussing their use. Because of the verb agreement error in the definition, I suggested that he check the Longman Dictionary to make sure he had copied it correctly. I also told him that titles of books are underlined.

The following two excerpts are from his final draft:

Chopsticks have been used in Thailand for many years. The technique for using chopsticks is passed down from generation to generation. According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, chopsticks are "either of a pair of narrow sticks held between the thumb and fingers and used in East Asian countries for lifting food to the mouth." The use of chopsticks in Thailanad came from Chinese immigrants who came to Thailand a century ago.

Let me tell you how I hold chopsticks. I use four fingers to hold them. I hold one chopstick with my

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index and middle fingers. The other one rests on my ring finger. And I press my finger on this chopstick because I want it to be stationary at all times.

Chet corrects the dictionary section and has a strong opening paragraph for his paper. The second example is from the middle of his paper. He discusses, in detail, the history as well as the materials used to make chopsticks. Then, he returns to the idea from his freewrite, that there are various ways to use chopsticks. He describes how he holds them (he knows himself best) clearly, precisely, correctly, and with a strong personal voice.

With native speakers, it is assumed that writing skills are readily available. Because most native speakers have had years of grammar instruction, it is also assumed that these writers can succeed without much trouble. This just isn't so. Many native speakers have a great deal of trouble writing. The difficulty often comes from instruction which focuses on form. As I said before, they begin as architects and are forced to inhabit pre-fabricated houses because that's how teachers think writers write. Non-native speakers learn to write just like native speakers, not prescriptively but by learning to adjust their Monitors. With the switch on low, beginning writers can utilize their store of acquired skilld; with the switch on high they can integrate their learned skills. And if there is a deficiency, they can learn to correct it.

I always tell my students, "The more you write, the better

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you get."

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